



Understanding the Past



India in the Mirror of History



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CHAPTER 3

SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE OF THE SHAMSI NOBLES

Fazeela Shah Nawaz

Nobles of Sultanate period formed the elite class of medieval Indian society. The nobility enjoyed primacy after the establishment of the Sultanate under Sultan Iltutmish. Many of the Shamsi nobles, rose from very humble beginnings, became men of power and influence. These nobles who made history by their deeds of valour and other virtues had their own individual traits of characters. Although evidence throws light on the socio-cultural aspect of the Shamsi nobles, but the scattered references referred their generosity, liberality and charitable acts towards their subordinates, men of letters and their servants. The Shamsi nobles imitated the ways of the Sultan, thus consequently they displayed pomp, power and magnificence in their life and attitude. Some of them even tried to assume the emblems of royalty.¹

Economy also played a vital role in shaping the socio-cultural behaviour of the Shamsi nobility since they held land assignments in form of the *iqta* and also accumulated wealth in form of booty.² They received honours and gifts from Sultan Iltutmish. On the day of appointment of Malik Saifuddin Ibak Yughantat to the *iqta* of Sursuti, Sultan Iltutmish gave directions for presentation of a horse to each of the Amirs, Maliks and grandees.³ This gift was to enhance his position and procurement of influence among the Shamsi nobles. Likewise on the appointment of Malik Nasiruddin Aiytim to Ajmer, Sultan presented him an elephant which distinguished him above the other Maliks.⁴ Even robes of honour were bestowed by the Sultan to his nobles.⁵ Matrimonial relations between the royal family and the nobles of

high repute also enhanced the social status of the nobility among the ruling class. Malik Ikhtiyaruddin Aetikin married the Sultan's sister, which permitted him to take the *naubat* and an elephant.⁶ To enhance their social position, the below ranked nobles make matrimonial relations with illustrious nobles. Malik Saifuddin Ibak Yughantat married his daughter to Malik Qamaruddin Kiran Temur Khan.⁷ Sultan Iltutmish during his lifetime materialized marriage of a daughter of Malik Bahauddin Tughril of Bayana to Malik Tajuddin Arsalan Khan.⁸

Following the royal tradition, the Shamsi nobles spent extravagantly on their household. However, the nobles used to wear a *Khit'at* suit on public occasions. This official dress consisted of a *Kulah* for head-dress, a tunic made of brocade and velvet and a white belt. The high ranked noble usually rode on a fine tartar stallion with costly tappings and a few retainers walking before and after him.⁹ Malik Fakhruddin used to change a new dress daily consisted of *Qaba*, *Yakta* (summer dress), *Pirahan* (shirt) and *Izar* (Pajama), *dastarcha* (short turban or handkerchief).¹⁰ There are references to the rich costumes, apparently worn by the Sultans, Princess and nobles. These are *diba-i-haftrang* (variegated brocades of seven colours), *jama-i-unnabi* (carnation coloured garment), *bisat-i-zamurradi* (emerald coloured apparel), *libas-i-parniyan* (a garment of a fine painted/ china silk cloth), *jama-i-zarbaft* (a robe of brocade of cloth of gold), *jama-i-sanjab* (a fur dress), *libas-i-bahman* (an apparel of fine silk interwoven or painted with flowers), *khaftan-i-qaba* (a vest worn under a close long gown or tunic), *qaba-i-fistuqi* (a tunic or a cloak of pistachio or sea green colour), and *tailasan* (the end of a turban-sash hanging down behind like a lappet, also a hood).¹¹

In view of Ziauddin Barani, there occurred strong competition in their philanthropy among the Khans and Maliks. Whenever one Khan or Malik heard that another Khan or Malik had fed five hundred persons, the former felt ashamed and he tried to feed a thousand persons. If he learnt that a certain Khan at the time of a journey gave two hundred *tankas* in charity, he felt ashamed and tried to give four hundred *tankas* in charity. If a particular khan in his wine party gave fifty horses and garments to two hundred persons, another grew jealous and gave charity to five hundred persons.¹² This mutual competition worked in two ways: one, these nobles never acknowledge the superiority of other nobles with meaningfully saying that "what are thou that I am not and what will thou be that I shall not be".¹³ Secondly, the poor people were benefitted at large. The noble's concern for the safety of common people and peasantry is evident from Minhaj's account. It is recorded in *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* that Sultan Iltutmish appointed one of his trusted nobles malik Tajuddin Sanjar-i-Gazkal Khan governor of Uchch. As a governor, Malik Tajuddin made efforts for the development and prosperity of the territory of Uchch. It brought together both the catagories of society the respected one and the common people. Under the justice and benevolence of this noble (Malik) of good disposition, the people were living happily. Being a just administrator, he was favourable to all without any partiality. Thus, he provided safety and security to peasantry

as well as the common people alike.¹⁴ Likewise, Malik Saifuddin Aibek the other Turkish noble of Sultan Iltutmish gained his name and fame in his assigned territory with regard to his benevolence and care to the safety of the people. When Sultan Iltutmish made him the *Sar-i-Jandar* (Chief of the *Jandars*) with three *lae jitals*, in advance, for maintenance of his position, he joined the office against his wishes. On Sultan's enquiry about his reluctance Malik Saifuddin explained that my attachment with an office of affliction incite fear in me that I would not be able to practice blood-shedding, torture, extortion and oppression upon muslims and the subjects (i.e. Hindus). Malik Saifuddin prayed, further, to the Sultan for assignment of other official works. Consequently Sultan Iltutmish pleased with him and showed great reliance on him and gave him the *iqta* of Narnul.¹⁵

Minhaj highly praised Ulugh Khan (later became Sultan Balban) and other renowned Shamsi Maliks for their liberality and generosity.¹⁶ He mentions Malik Tajuddin Sanjar Gazlak Khan who was remembered, for a long time, for his charitable acts.¹⁷ Malik Tughril Tughan Khan was a man of many virtues and noble qualities that in liberality and generosity he had no equal in those days.¹⁸ Barani records that when Balban was a Khan he was famous for his charitable acts among the Shamsi nobles.¹⁹ He further records the charitable acts of few Shamsi nobles who were continuing their career under Balban. Special mention is of Malik Alauddin Kishli Khan who sometimes, in fits of generosity, distributed everything he possessed and retained nothing except the clothes that he wore.²⁰ Once he gave all the horses of his stable to Khwaja Shams Muin for composing a *Qasida* in his praise.²¹ On account of his generosity and charitable acts, he became famous not only in Hindustan rather in Khurasan too. Amir Khusrau once told Barani that no mother could give birth to another Kishli Khan so far as generosity and manly virtues were concerned.²²

The nobles drew inspiration in their social life from the imperial court and tried to emulate the Sultan in all their social and cultural activities. In certain respect their assemblies were miniature court of the Sultan and their generosity, which often exceeds their means sometimes, evoked the Sultan's criticism.²³ Barani mentions a Shamsi noble Malik Fakhruddin who continued his career under Balban as Kotwal of Delhi for his reputation in charity. He used to disburse stipends and scholarships to twelve thousand pupils who recited the Quran. He was fastidious about clothes. He changed his clothes and bedding everyday which accumulated for dowry to orphan girls in their marriages. Thus thousands of orphan girls received dowry in times of their marriages. The socio-religious act of charity was also in practice, thus copyists of Quran were lavishly rewarded.²⁴ One Shamsi noble Malik Imadul Mulk gave several villages in charity.²⁵ Malik Ameer Ali *Sarjandar* was nicknamed *Hatim Khan* for his generosity. He never gave less than a thousand *tankas* in charity along with horses and robes. It is said that in charity he never gave a *jital* (a copper coin) to anyone.²⁶

However, an account of their generosity and charitable acts, the Maliks, Khans and other nobles had always been in debt as remarked Barani. These nobles compare one another

in their generosity and liberality. Because of them Multanis and *Sahs* of Delhi grew prosperous and acquired abundant wealth. They derived it from the resources of the nobles of Delhi. The nobles took loans from the Multanis and *Sahs* beyond limit and repaid the advances with largesses upon their iqtas. The moment a Khan or Malik held an assembly and invited notables as guests, his functionaries rushed to the *Multanis* and *Sahs* and took loans at interest. As a result, the creditors and money-lenders frequented the houses of the debtor nobles.²⁷

Exchange of pleasantries became the conventional rule of personal behaviour in social gatherings, court ceremonials and public life. On certain occasions the capital city and its vicinity were beautifully decorated. One such occasion was return of the Sultan or victorious noble to the capital city in triumph and victory. It was celebrated with great pomp and grandeur. Domes and pavilions were erected. Such occasions provided opportunities for public amusement. People from the all parts of domain gathered to see the show. Under every dome food, wine, betel leaf, etc. were distributed.²⁸ Minhaj gives a vivid description of such an occasion when a Shamsi noble Ulugh Khan-i-Azam returned to the capital from the hilly region of Kohpaya. On this occasion Sultan Iltutmish alongwith all the Maliks, Amirs, Sadrs, other dignitaries and inhabitants of the city came out to the site of Hauz-i-Rani. They drew up in lines, extending from Bagh-i-Jud to the Hauz-i-Rani and hastened to meet and do honour to Ulugh Khan-i-Azam and his accompanying standards. Sultan Iltutmish held an audience and Ulugh Khan-i-Azam with Maliks and Amirs attained the honour of kissing the threshold of the place of audience. The Maliks and Amirs of Ulugh Khan dressed in various coloured robes of satin, silk, brocade, gold and silver tissue and other expensive textures, and gold embroidered tunics and in other garments. These expensive robes were granted to them by Ulugh Khan. Then they all gathered in the audience hall and attained the honour of kissing the royal hand (*dastbos*) together with thousands of commendations, favours and assurances.²⁹

References are also found to the display of pomp and grandeur on the occasion of investiture ceremonies when Sultan received the robe of honour from the caliph. When the envoy brought robes from the Caliph for Sultan Iltutmish, he was immensely pleased.³⁰ Thus, in line he conferred robes of honour on most of his nobles. In the city, domes were erected and drum of joy were beaten and was celebrated with much festivity and rejoicings. On another occasion Khurasan emissaries visited to the royal court and attained the honour of kissing the royal hand. On this occasion grand audience was held. As per custom, all the Maliks received the emissaries with due respect. Royal palace was luxuriously decorated with costly carpets and cushions. All the Maliks, Amirs, Sadrs and grandees with golden girdles encircled the throne in pomp and pride.³¹

The most celebrated and popular festival was *Id-ul-Fitr* which marked the end of the month of *Ramzan*. According to Minhaj *tazkir* (discourse) was delivered daily in the month of *Ramzan*. He also mentions the celebration of *Id-ul-Adha* without any detail. Likewise,

the Muharram was observed with due solemnity and in the first ten days discourse was delivered daily.³²

Other means of rejoicing were the convivial assemblies, wine parties and feasts organized by the Shamsi nobles. They spent lavishly on it. Wine drinking in the convivial parties and in the company of *nadeems* (friends) appears to have been a common practice during the 13th century.³³ Balban, as a khan, used to take wine in festive assemblies. He held these assemblies two-three times in a week. Prominent Maliks, Khans and other dignitaries were invited by him. In these convivial parties he invited friends, *nadeems*, reciters and dancers.³⁴ Nobles held wine parties at their houses and invited their friends.³⁵ Barani further mentions that Shamsi nobles presented horses and clothes in charity in their wine parties.³⁶ A Shamsi noble who was appointed as Rawat-i-Arz by Balban was famous for his hospitality. He lavishly entertained his guests. He often invited his subordinates to his house and gave robes to everyone of them. Foods of different tastes were served to the guests, but the common people and even the *Darveshes* were not ignored.³⁷

Scattered references referred to the etiquettes and manners of Shamsi nobles. Minhaj mentions that when he reached the camp of Malik Tajuddin Sanjar Gazlak Khan, he was treated with reverence and the Khan rose from his *masnad* and went through the ceremonials to receive him. Khan seated Minhaj in his own place respectfully and offered him fruits.³⁸ Malik Balban reached the camp of Malik Sher Khan and seated himself down in the latter's pavilion, upon which Sher Khan arose from his place to show regard towards him.³⁹ Even secret meeting was organized at the residence of a noble which was attended by prominent nobles.⁴⁰

The ceremonies at the court were humiliating and servile.⁴¹ Shamsi nobles stood with folded hands in the presence of Sultan Iltutmish. Barani mentions that Sultan remarked that when he saw nobles standing with folded hands in his presence, he felt like stepping down from the throne and kissing their hands and even their feet.⁴² Isami mentions that as soon as the Qazi entered the royal court, Sultan Iltutmish descended from his throne to receive him with great honour and respect. Sultan offered him a seat by his side and kissed Qazi's hand several times.⁴³ Thus *paibos* (Kissing the royal feet) and *dastbos* (kissing the royal hands) were regarded as essentials of etiquettes. Shamsi nobles performed *paibos* and *dastbos* by way of allegiance to the Sultan.⁴⁴ Minhaj mentions Ulugh Khan (Balban) performing *zaminbos* with all his contingents in front of the royal throne.⁴⁵

The favourite outdoor sports of the Sultans and the nobility were hunting. This was a source of pleasure and exercise. It is mentioned that Balban as a Khan was very fond of hunting and played it with great zeal in the winter. Once he passed an order that around the city for a distance of twenty *karohs*, game should be preserved. The *Mir-i-Shikars* (chief huntsmen) held a high rank in his service. In the winter he mounted his horse every morning and rode as far as the town of Rewari and even beyond for hunting and returned back to the

city at night, but he never passed his night outside the city. He had a house full of falcons. He kept trained falcon-keepers and watched the falcon's fly in the air.⁴⁶ Minhaj mentions one Malik Tajuddin Sanjar Kuret Khan as a skillful archer. It is said that no animal in the chase could escape his arrow.⁴⁷ Similarly another Shamsi noble, Malik Alauddin Kishli Khan was very fond of hunting. As a skilled hunter he was famous in Hindustan and Khurasan.⁴⁸

Besides hunting another outdoor game, *Chaugan* (Polo) was very popular in early 13th Century. Aibek fell from horse back and died while he was playing *Chaugan* at Lahore. It was played on horseback with a stick or club and balls.⁴⁹ According to Isami, the sons of Ulugh Khan (Balban) were keenly playing Polo.⁵⁰ Among other games played by the nobles were *Shatranj* (chess), *nard* and *Qammarbazi* (gambling).⁵¹

Shamsi nobles took interest in the field of literature. Jajarmi was directed by Malik Nizam-ul-Mulk Junaidi, Wazir of Sultan Iltutmish, to use simple language in his translation of Al-Ghazali's *Ihya-ul-Ulum*.⁵² This illustrious Wazir of Sultan Iltutmish is said to have patronized Said-ud-din Mohammad al-Awfi.⁵³ Amir Khusrau was patronized by Malik Amir Ali Sar-i-jandar. He composed a poem *Asp-namah* in his praise.⁵⁴ Barani mentions that Khwaja Shams Muin (*nadeen-i-khaas*) and Qutbuddin Hasan Ghorī have written several books in praise of Malik Alauddin Kishli Khan. They wrote verses in his praise. Once, Malik gave all the horses of his stable to Khwaja Shams Muin for composing a *qasida* in his praise. This *qasida* was read before Balban on the eve of *Nauroz* celebrations.⁵⁵

Malik Tajuddin Reza, a *Dabir* (Imperial secretary) of Iltutmish is said to have composed verses on the conquest of Gwalior fort and on the death of Sultan.⁵⁶ Minhaj-i-Siraj, the author of *Tabâqat-i-Nasiri*, was appointed as the *Qazi*, *Khatib* (preacher), *Muhtasib* (censor) and *Imam* of Gwalior and was put in charge of all religious affairs.⁵⁷ Besides being a good prose writer, Minhaj was also a talented poet. His deep occupation with his duties as the chief Qazi and the preacher left him little time to compose poetry. In spite of his varied activities he mentions at several places the *Qasidas* and verses composed by him.⁵⁸ Minhaj mentions the names and acknowledge the gratitude and patronage by the Shamsi nobles. He mentions Malik Tajuddin Sanjar Kutlugh who helped him a lot and patronized him.⁵⁹

References show that Shamsi nobles also took interest in the constructional activities of both religious and secular merits. Minhaj mentions that Malik Tajuddin Sanjar constructed Jami Masjids at several places.⁶⁰ Sher Khan had erected the forts of Tabarhinda and Bhatnir and at the latter place he had also erected a lofty cupola.⁶¹ Malik Fakhruddin constructed his *Rauza* (mausoleum).⁶² Epigraph from Aligarh (originally from Kol Minerate) records the construction of edifice by a great and the learned noble Qutlugh Khan.

Conclusively, the Shamsi nobles, being holding the powerful position with strong financial support, were living in pomp and often imitated the Sultan. They spent extravagantly on their household. Their convivial assemblies, feasts and festivals were pompously

celebrated. Often their generosity and charitable activity crossed the limits and they became the victims of debt.

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